

Scripture: Luke 10:25-37 NRSV

Sermon:

Does a story like the good Samaritan still have power when everyone thinks they know the correct answer to it? This is the question I found myself drawn to when I began to research for today's message. Our gospel story today is so familiar to us and most people in our culture that there seems to be very little room for new understanding or for getting to the true shock value that the passage would have had for its day and time. I have heard and read many reflections and thoughts on this particular parable from Jesus. I've seen and heard the deep dives into the symbolic meanings of each of the different actors in the story, the nuance of culture, and religious practice.

Now, those items are not necessarily useless. It is helpful to understand that the Samaritan is an outsider; the lawyer and the priest pass by a person who needed help and did not help when they should have. I remember hearing in one of the many sermons I have heard on this passage someone saying the priest did not want to be unclean because he was traveling to Jerusalem for religious practice, which raises some problems. First, how do we know that? The text doesn't say that is what the priest is doing, nor what his intent is. Also, religiously speaking, helping a person supersedes cleanliness in the Old Testament, so even there that does not work out.

If I am not going to reflect on these details to try and build a palatable narrative for us, then what is next? Maybe it is to reflect on one of my favorite verses in the New Testament, Verse 27 “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength and love your neighbor as yourself.” Obviously, I think that is the thing we need to reflect on, right? Well, yes and no. It is a point we can take from this passage and is worthy of reflection on its own. In fact, again, I have heard multiple sermons over the years on only this passage. Definitions of what the heart means in the ancient world are that it is in your stomach, not your chest. Or the fact that Jesus adapts a Greek view of the world here, seeing the person as split into three distinct parts: body, mind, and soul. Again, all of these things are worth reflecting on, and are true at least when they are not trying to hide the point of the whole story.

In order to get the point of the whole story we need to zoom out a little bit here. The first thing that most sermons seem to forget to point to is the context of this story, which is included in our reading. Jesus is being tested by a lawyer. Remember, scribe and lawyer are interchangeable here; they are both interpreters of the law and are in the same position socially. This lawyer is testing Jesus’ response about what a person must do to be saved. My favorite verse, Verse 27, is a part of this initial dialogue and is in fact the perfect and right answer given by Jesus to answer the needs of the law. Notice there is no argument from the scribe regarding Jesus’ interpretation. Instead, we are given the answer to what the

scribe is going to do next in Verse 29; he wants to justify himself.

Now, here we need to slow down a bit. We need to stop for a moment and think about what's going on here. Have you ever gotten an answer to something that you did not want? In order to change the answer or to qualify the answer, you ask another question or seek another perspective. Kids do this all the time. They ask mom for something, and when the answer is not something they like, then they ask dad. Adults would never do that, right? Except we do that all the time. This is how our world operates. We see this in this country right now, laws have been removed to protest court filings by enabling filings to happen anywhere in the country, not just in the district that is most concerned with it. This enables the people who bring the lawsuit to shop around for a judge who will give them the answer they want. So, no, we cannot imagine someone being unhappy with Jesus' answer, right?

If you were in Jesus' shoes, or sandals, I guess, how would you respond to this avoidance? Well, for Jesus, you tell a story, this story is shocking, but perhaps not in the way you have always taken it. You see, when we hear this story, we look to see who we are in the story. Are we the priest? The Scribe? Or the Pharisee? But given the context of the story, that is not Jesus' intent, not that it is bad, but it perhaps avoids the thrust of the story. So, I want to invite you into where I think Jesus wants us to see ourselves, we are the guy in the ditch who has been robbed. The question is not who we would help, but who we would accept help from.

You see the issue at stake here, and a further summation of “love the lord your God” is kindness. Who, by showing kindness, truly embodies the spirit of God and what it means to seek God. As I alluded to at the beginning of this message, there was no reason for the people who passed the injured person not to help, religiously, sacredly, socially, there were no reasons. However, there are reasons for the person who is injured not to accept the kindness of the person helping him. You see, we assume a lot about this passage. We assume the person injured does not have any agency; perhaps they are unconscious because we do not hear from them. I think it is because the challenge of the question lies in whether we would accept the help from someone whom we see as an enemy or not. And that perhaps kindness is more important than the differences we see and seek to use to avoid kindness in return.

I know some of you are probably struggling a bit with this interpretation. First, remember that this story is meant to be shocking. Parables were not cute little stories; they were stories with a major twist in understanding that often turned the world upside down. So, if you place yourself in the ditch, put yourself in the story as the person who has been robbed and beaten, my question is, who would you not want to accept help from? Now you do not get to use the excuse “I’ll take help from anyone!” Because you and I both know that is not true. There are always people whose intent you would second-guess. Maybe politically, the person is wearing blue or red. Perhaps it’s a Muslim or a Hindu. Maybe it’s a Jehovah’s

Witness or a Catholic. Perhaps you have a specific face to it, my aunt, cousin, or brother. You see, all of us can think of someone we would not want to accept kindness from.

Jesus is reminding us that, regardless of our feelings, regardless of our political or religious leanings, kindness is the deciding factor of whether or not a person is seeking to love God or love their neighbor. This leads to another brief aside we have to look at, and that is Christianity in America's ability to confuse the law of God with the love of God.

We have placed such an emphasis on following the law that we have forgotten that Jesus' instruction here is about kindness. We turn our heads from what is happening in our country, the cruel treatment of the stranger, or worse, we celebrate it with happiness for new prisons being built, and we have forgotten that kindness is what we are called to. If we are going to be the Christians that Jesus calls us to be, we must both accept from and do kindness to people whom we would rather reject. In the broader context of our reading, most of us are the scribe asking the question in the story, trying to avoid the responsibility of accepting and giving kindness. In our nation today, it is easier to turn a blind eye or to celebrate cruelty than it is to stand here and say kindness is what God expects of us. If you don't believe that, then you should have seen me writing this sermon. I know some will completely reject what I am saying as political idealism, or that I just want to be negative about what is happening. Except this is not me saying it. It is Jesus. And I had to wrestle within myself for whom I do not want to show kindness to, and

I firmly believe that God wants me to hold you to the same standard that he was holding an ancient scribe to. That standard is to show and accept kindness from those whom you would rather reject, ridicule, or persecute.

The call is as simple as it is complex. Go forth and accept and show kindness. That is the true hallmark of salvation, not the sinner's prayer, not comfort and peace, but tangible acts of kindness to and from those who you would reject. Amen.